

4-H Horse Experience

An exhibitor's view from the 2004 Florida State 4-H Horse Show.

By Arielle Macuch, ec magazine junior correspondent

What organization better influences youth than 4-H? The national 4-H program teaches kids from age 8 to adult the values of good character, along with how to run a business and even daily chores. One of our favorite past times – showing horses – has also become a part of 4-H. State 4-H Championships are always held in the summer, which gives exhibitors all spring to polish their skills.

4-H clubs from around the U.S. commence for an annual series of horse shows starting from practice in a pasture to a national-level horse show. This year, I received the opportunity to compete at a state level. I am excited to share my many experiences of the Florida State 4-H Horse Show today!

There are general guidelines to “make it” to state, and when reaching the Florida state show, many thrills and challenges await. To be invited to compete at this premier show, you must first qualify at your county level, and then qualify at district and regional levels. Getting to know 4-Hers, spending time with friends and family, and being a part of a real competition teaches us how to work with other, how to master many skills, and especially teaches how to behave in the heat of competition.

Playing by the Rules

Preparing for the Florida 4-H State Horse Show, which was held July 8-10, 2004, is a lot of fun, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's a simple task. Like most state horse shows, it's usually easy to find volunteers (a good deal of 4-H is run by volunteers). In Florida, the 4-H rider is limited to using only one horse throughout the year and may not switch horses once the year begins. Bree Ann Scarbrough (from Sarasota County, age 11) was one of the riders who was unfortunately unable to compete for the reason of switching horses in the middle of this year. Because she is my cousin, I was very sad that she couldn't come, but she did show up, along with all her other friends, her trainer Jennifer Foley, and some of her other family. Luckily, she was not discouraged, and she is, in fact, looking forward to showing her new horse, Rudy, next year. It is important to be aware of the rules and try to work with them as closely as possible in order to fully experience this 4-H project.

Another bit of important information 4-Hers need to know is that they must attend a safety clinic where they will practice using safety helmets, approved bits, and safely lead and perform with their horses. After they attend the clinic, they will be free to show at a county level to try out for showing at their area's level and finally the state level, which was held in

Tampa, at the Florida State Fairgrounds. Bringing home a ribbon is a great accomplishment at any state 4-H show!

Starting the 4-H Experience

My 4-H experience was anything but ordinary, because I began with my step-dad's bouncy, woolly, backyard horse, Smokey. It was a real challenge to turn this sunburned cow horse with a straggly, long mane into a high-quality show horse. Talk about extreme makeover! I was already an experienced rider, but new at showing. This is how most 4-Hers start out, so they shouldn't lose hope if they don't place as well as the older, experienced riders. I reached most of my goals on Smokey, other than reaching state level, but I eventually decided to step up to a horse that better matched my riding experience level. This is when 18-year-old Red G Red came into my life. I soon realized that his skills far exceeded mine, but we were inseparable. Red Gee Red's owners, my friends Bobbi Smith and Megan, "donated" him to me, and I felt very honored to be able to have him grazing in our paddock! The first year that I showed Red Gee Red, I made it to state, but as I increased in skill and learned to work with him, we began to understand each other and could start "adding the finesse" or fine-tune our performance.

Altogether, the story of my growing in 4-H was what I would call an action-packed adventure book, but this year my achievements helped me to become even more competitive in areas that I was weak in before. I needed all the practice and experience I could get anyway, because the longer I showed in 4-H, the tougher the competition was getting.

Even though the other kids at the 2004 Florida State 4-H Horse Show truly were difficult to be up against, that doesn't mean that they weren't friendly or willing to share their ideas. Many of the people whom I met (that I would soon be showing against) were open to telling me their thoughts and tips on how to do a great job.

Formula for Success

While many people at 4-H State debated over which feeds were the best to feed their horses, or what amount of exercise was required to go with that type of diet, they all agreed that a horse's diet greatly contributes to its performance. While Kyle Kellogg (from Manatee County, shows in English and jumping) at age 14, needs to feed his 9-year-old grey gelding, Face The Future (Levi) 8 lbs. a day of Seminole Senior Formula, I only have to feed my older, less energetic Red Gee Red 6 lbs. Of course, most of the 4-H members add at least a couple of flakes of hay to their horses' diets, because horses are designed to graze most of the day. I know Red Gee Red needs plenty of his essential nutrients from his diet, but at the same time I don't want him to be overweight. He can't do well in any western

classes like that!

Sarah Gravely (also from Manatee) at age 14 shows her 6-year-old horse, Sonny's Bar Gab, in classes like western pleasure, western riding, trail, horsemanship, and showmanship, and she says that she only needs to feed her horse one pound a day of Seminole Victory!, and she with her horse did an outstanding job (and her horse looks great!). What can also be gathered is that even though my friends all fed their horses differently, most agree that Seminole Feed is great for any type of show horses. To further prove this, Kyle's mother, Shannon, mentioned that the horses stay healthier with Seminole, because Seminole uses a fixed-formula recipe for every feed. Sarah's mother, a 4-H club leader, said, "We use Seminole because we hunt seat equitation is a 4-H class that can be very technical and beautiful to watch. I heard it was a really great feed. It makes a drastic difference in the coat's shininess."

I found it rather strange how so many different people who fed Seminole noticed shininess of the coat – that was the first thing they always mentioned about it! Well, whether they know it or not, I believe that a shiny coat is a sign that your horse is altogether healthy which is the foundation of a good performance (not to mention the fact that showmanship judges love shiny coats, and all 4-Hers are required to be in a showmanship class!).

Beyond Nutrition

Yes, I am glad that my horse has a shiny coat, but no horse rider should forget that proper feeding and health aren't the only tactics that 4-H members could use. Any person can be amazed by some of the tricks these kids had for optimum performance if they would just look closely. The competitors knew that, like the diet, the "getting ready tactics" depended on each individual horse. Some horses needed longing or hard hours of riding (with short, healthy breaks) before their classes to burn off some of that nervous energy, while other horses required to be warmed up, stretched out, and then simply left alone. There were kids that wore loudly colored outfits for that extra "look at me" and fashionably curly ponytails, while other kids' parents were able to make their hair a comfortable, slick bun, tight to perfection. A few boys and some short-haired girls didn't do much with their hair, and they instead spent more time shining their boots and polishing their silver.

Even though I have only had two years of experience with showing before this year, I knew that it was a really good idea to get some good sleep in order to get the mind off of show patterns a while and take a rest. As odd as it may seem, I left the stables earlier than most and headed for the hotel!

What Else Happened?

I need to admit, this show wasn't all dirty work. There were other things that the different clubs got to do. When everyone from my county, Sarasota, arrived at the state fairgrounds, we soon set to work preparing and cleaning our stalls with high hopes to win the prestigious Golden Shovel award. There are judges who inspect the stalls and choose who they think has the cleanest stalls, and they are the ones who get to be picked to win the Golden Shovel Award.

There are even judges who pick who has the best-decorated stalls! I really enjoyed decorating our stalls this year, using table cloth, spray paint, scissors, glue, signs, and other various materials to try to support our annual theme. Sarasota County's theme this year was "4-H is OUT OF THIS WORLD!" It was a great plan, though it fell through when we realized we didn't have our county's name written anywhere on our decorations! We still liked to decorate, and our marks on our stalls (which were all purposely placed close to each other) made me feel like we were at home in Tampa.

You might be surprised at how many people came to the show. Not only do the competitors come, their friends come too! I was pleased to have my younger cousin, Carly Scarbrough, to come and root me on in the ring. She brought lots of cheer and excitement, and she also got to share in the 4-H experience. If you went to the state show, you may have seen Carly whizzing by on her scooter. Carly, better known as "Scooter Girl," made sure to not scare the horses when she rode around (which is very important, especially in shows) and she stayed away from the horses in the ring. She was able to be part of many of our group's activities and also got to share in eating the pizza that we ordered one day. Coming to help must have paid off! Even Maura Szerbin, age 13, came to help her friends out, and she will hopefully be showing in hunter under saddle, English equitation, western pleasure, horsemanship, and showmanship next year.

Gain & Glory

This year, Red Gee Red and I didn't qualify for Southeastern 4-H Regionals like my friends Sarah and Kyle did, but that doesn't mean that I didn't get anything out of the experience! I enjoyed myself, and I got to exercise the ever-important skills of being a good sport, working with other people who are different than I. I also learned skills of horse showing, and I gained many more important character traits both through others sharing their stories and through learning the hard way. I think that most of the Florida State 4-H Horse Show exhibitors had to exercise a lot of self-discipline, determination, responsibility, and patience! Though there were some instances that could have been better, most can say that they had a

great time. There was nice weather, and as Cierra Bennetch of Marion County said, "The state show was awesome this year!" I asked her about her favorite part and she answered, "Just gettin' to show against different people and hangin' with the other members."

Sarah also got a lot from the show and said, "Patience is a virtue..." and then she continued, "...it helps you!"

Altogether, anyone can see that a lot of work went into the Florida State 4-H Horse Show. The 4-Hers are also thankful that so many volunteered help to make it happen. This year, I personally learned how to make a tight and comfy (hair) bun. I learned that everyone needs to find a special food to fit their horses needs, that many people are obsessed with shiny coats, and that in order to have a good time when showing horses, it is often important to have nearby your parents, aunts, grandmas, brothers, and cousins! I hope that more people can share in the 4-H horse experience, and that they will get as much out of it as I did.

Arielle Macuch is a 15-year-old 4-H member from Myakka City, Florida. Seminole Feed, located in Ocala, Florida, is a strong supporter of 4-H Horse Programs, including the Florida State 4-H Horse Show and the South Carolina State 4-H Horse Show. For more information, email editor@ecmagazine.net.